

THE 1855 GOLD SHIPMENT ROBBERY

23 [TWC 27(4) p11 2009]

Dr. Douglas Austin writes to advise that the National Railway Museum in York has on display one of the strong-boxes used to transport gold (and subsequently lead) in the Great Gold Robbery of 1855. As many of you may already know, Mssrs. Edward Agar, William Pierce, James Burgess, and William George Tester conspired to steal a gold shipment which was destined for the Crimea from the London to Paris via Folkestone train. In brief, the robbery was accomplished with a great deal of clever planning and involved the making of duplicate keys for the strongboxes prior to the shipment of the gold. En route, the gold was removed from the boxes and lead substituted at Folkestone. At Boulogne the robbery was discovered when it was discovered that one of the three boxes weighed 40 lbs (18 kg) less than it should have. The conspiracy came to light when Agar, who was in prison and awaiting transportation to Australia for life, wrote to Fanny Kay (the mother of his illegitimate child) to verify that Pierce had paid her £7,000. When Agar discovered that Pierce had failed to keep his part of the bargain, he confessed to his part in the crime and implicated his accomplices. When further investigation corroborated Agar's story, his co-conspirators were arrested, tried and convicted. Pierce was sentenced to two years imprisonment for larceny, while Burgess and Tester were transported for 14 years. Only about £2,000 of the £12,000 stolen from the shipment was ever recovered. Douglas also provides us with the information that the transcript of the trial is available (apparently in it's entirety) online at:
[http://www.oldbaileyonline.org/browse.jsp?id=tl_8570105-250-offence-1 &div=t18570105-250&terms=gold#highlight](http://www.oldbaileyonline.org/browse.jsp?id=tl_8570105-250-offence-1&div=t18570105-250&terms=gold#highlight)

A surprisingly thorough account of the event also appears in the book "*Facts, Failures, and Frauds*" by D. Morier Evans (1859) pp. 484-570 (available free at Google Book Search as a downloadable PDF file).

The story of the robbery was brought back to life with a retelling in the May 1955 issue of *The Railway Magazine* in an article by Michael Robbins entitled *The Great South-Eastern Bullion Robbery*. The story was subsequently recounted by Michael Crichton in his historical novel "*The Great Train Robbery*" published in 1975 and reprinted in 2002. The Crichton novel was the basis for the 1979 movie by the same name which starred Sean Connery and Donald Sutherland. A picture of the bullion box on display at the National Railway Museum is shown below and may be found at:

<http://www.nrm.org.uk/en/OurCollection/UsingTheRailway/CollectionItem.aspx?objid=224559>



Bullion Box, SER, Box Containing lead shot from Great Gold Robbery from London - Paris via Folkestone train on 15 May 1855, object No. 224559, National Railway Museum, Collection: NRM —miscellanea and curiosities, Object name: bullion box.